

Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka - Evidence From Early Literary Sources

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1. Independent recognition of Sri Lanka from very early times as the land of the Sinhala.

Fa Hsien [5th century] and Hieun Tsang [8th century] use the unmistakable terms Sinhala [**Seng - chia - lo**] and **Sih tse kuo** when they refer to Sri Lanka. At least this 5th century usage [in independent external sources] must be considered as establishing unassailably the dominance and leadership of the Sinhala in the island from times of recorded history.

2. Introduction of Buddhism and the presence of Brāhmaṇā and Khattiyā in the island.

These cooperative peace-loving ethnic sub-groups [possibly non-Sinhala and non-Buddhist at the time] appear to have blended well with the larger community, at a multiple religio-cultural level.

3. Success of Buddhism in Sri Lanka *vis-a-vis* rivalry of the neighbouring non-Buddhists - an ethno-religious hostility.

King Devānampiya Tissa, with generous Indian support, stimulated a vigorous growth of the new religion in the land. Monks and Nuns became erudite exponents of the Dhamma, places of worship sprang up with great rapidity and the teaching became widely spread. Within the first one hundred years of the new religion, the hostility which the Buddhists of Sri Lanka suffered in the hands of Damiḷā is incredibly extensive. [Apparently these Damiḷā are nativised invaders from the neighbouring subcontinent.].

4. The enemy is recognized and necessary resistance planned by Duṭṭhagāmaṇī's father.

Pali chronicle literature, classical as well as popular, contain ample evidence which report continuous attacks by the Damiḷā on Buddhism, both on Buddhist monks as well as Buddhist monuments like stupas, Bodhi trees etc. These seem to have been heavily concentrated on the region of Anuradhapura which turned out to be the religiously rich capital of the land.

It is also evident that infiltrations towards the southern capital in Rohana was rapidly taking place. These definitely look like political expansionist activities. Kākavaṇṇa Tissa had to appoint deputies and set up garrisons en route for the protection of the area.

5. An honestly motivated Duṭṭhagāmaṇī goes to war to rid the country of this menace.

As a sincere Buddhist, Duṭṭhagāmaṇī goes to war, **carrying Buddha relics in his royal sceptre**. After fierce fighting all the way, he crushes the enemy and kills Elara in a hand to hand fight. He has **reason to rejoice** over his triumph in this **war of liberation**. The Mahāvamsa **makes him mourn over it**. We disagree on grounds of better evidence from a more reliable source, namely the **Vihāravamsa Atṭhakathā [DA.II. 640]**



Observations of Early Foreign Writers

- Ceylon along the Rail Track - Henry W. Cave

First Edition 1910 / Second Ed. 2002 p.184

In the interval between Tissa's death and the building of the Brazen Palace by Duttagamini, a large number of monasteries were erected and the community of monks greatly increased. But even so early as this after the foundation of the sacred city trouble came in the form of invasion from Southern India. For some years the Tamils held the upper hand. Elara, one of their princes, usurped the Sinhalese throne, and the Buddhist cause was in danger of complete annihilation, when the Sinhalese king Duttagamini, stirred by religious enthusiasm, made a desperate stand and recovered his throne. The story of the final combat is worthy of our notice as showing the character of the man who erected the most of the Anuradhapura monuments.

It was in B.C. 164 that Duttagamini, having grown weary of the protracted struggle of his army which for some years had led with varying fortune against Elara, challenged that prince to single combat. Having given order that no other person should assail Elara, he mounted his favourite war elephant, Kandula, and advanced to meet his adversary. Elara hurled the first spear, which Duttagamini successfully evaded and at once made his own elephant charge with his tusks the elephant of his opponent. After a desperate struggle Elara and his elephant fell together.

With the death of Elara the power of the invaders was broken, and the heroic Duttagamini restored to the country those conditions of peace and prosperity under which Tissa had been enabled to inaugurate the religious foundations already referred to. To the further development of these he now applied himself.



Some Selections of Grave Errors of Judgement For Real Serious Study

Extracted from RELIGION, THE MISSING DIMENSION OF STATECRAFT
EDITED BY Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson - Oxford University Press,
1994, p. 309 f.

Ambivalent Imperatives A Buddhist Example

Much in Buddhism favors the cause of peacemaking. The well-known examples on nonviolence, on persuasion rather than force and coercion to convey the teachings of the Buddha, and on the readiness to "bear with" opponents rather than to dominate them - all lead to a spirit of tolerance and forbearance, which is a crucial condition for creating peace. Harvey Cox and his colleagues deal with these qualities extensively in Chapter 12 of this volume. As they point out, there can be a dark side to Buddhism, too.

In the island republic of Sri Lanka, where Buddhism is the dominant religion, an ancient series of chronicles written by Buddhist monks glorifies the image of the image of the warrior king rather than the ideas of tolerance. It is recorded that in the second century B.C.E., King Duttagamani ("Gamani, the ferocious") went to war with a non-Buddhist king, **bearing a relic of the Buddha on his spear**. He eventually won a bloody victory, but when, as a good Buddhist, **he expressed remorse for all the people he had killed, he was informed by some monks that he need only worry about two of the victims, who happened to be Buddhists. No mercy was due [to] the others, said the monks, because the non-Buddhists were "not more to be esteemed than beasts."** [Emphasis mine].

Such an acceptance of violence, if not the glorification of it, has been adopted by some modern nationalists in Sri Lanka, where it has been used as a source of encouragement in the conflict with minority groups. Given the rich

peaceful tradition of Buddhism, there is significant opportunity for Sri Lankan Buddhists to lay the bellicose themes aside and to recover the tolerant, open-hearted tradition of King Ashoka, the famous Indian king who sought to promote religious tolerance as a basis for creating inclusive, peaceful conditions in his troubled country (Chapter 12). Righteous living, according to King Ashoka, had a common source: "Modesty of speech, one must not exalt one's creed by discrediting ... others ... Conduct is good only insofar as all listen to each other's creeds and love to listen to them."

*** Note.** Reference to **bearing a relic of the Buddha on his spear** and **the mock comforting of the king by monks** are both only a one-sided presentation deliberately put forward to distort historical realities.